



U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

Religious Minorities' Fight to Remain in Iraq

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Nadine Maenza, USCIRF Vice Chair:

Thank you, Chair Perkins. I would like to join in welcoming you all to today's hearing about religious freedom in Iraq. As a member of the USCIRF delegation to Iraq last month, we assessed religious freedom conditions in the country and attended a commemoration of the 2014 Yazidi genocide. Two of our fellow Commissioners had previously visited the country in March 2018. During those visits, we met with religious minority representatives, Iraqi and U.S. government officials, and NGOs who provided an up-to-date picture of the situation. We heard about some positive developments on the ground in northwestern Iraq, but we also heard of serious, long-term concerns for many of the nation's religious and ethnic minorities.

In the Nineveh Plain, the traditional heartland of many of Iraq's largest religious minorities—or components, as they prefer to be called—some communities have begun the long and fragile process of recovery. Christian representatives and NGOs told USCIRF that an estimated 30-50% of displaced residents have returned to some traditionally Christian towns such as Bartela and Qaraqosh. In those areas, USAID and other international supporters have been making significant efforts to distribute aid, rebuild homes, and help returnees find some semblance of normalcy. We look forward to hearing more about these efforts directly from USAID shortly.

The news was encouraging, but far too many people have not yet felt sufficiently safe to go home. Their concerns focused on two particular threats. First, the presence in the

Nineveh Plain of the Popular Mobilization Forces, or PMF, represents the clearest and most consistent obstacle. Iran-supported militias such as the 30th and 50th Brigades continue to engage in violence and corruption, as well as exacerbate sectarian tensions in key towns of the area. While the Iraqi government has made some attempts to rein in those militias, its ability and potential willingness to do so appears limited at present.

Religious minorities' second major concern is the potential for ISIS to regroup. The Iraqi armed forces, in conjunction with the U.S. military and other allies, destroyed ISIS' last bastions of territorial control in late 2017. Since that time, however, ISIS remnants, likely numbering in the thousands, fled into hiding but have continued to stage attacks with alarming regularity. There is no doubt that they remain a real and present danger to those they targeted from 2014 to 2017.

Vice Chair Gayle Manchin will now turn to U.S. and international efforts to help those traumatized communities recover and rehabilitate.

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